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Page 1 of 2

Affordable housing enters organic produce biz

By Alexander Britell



Betty Arnett (left) and Cleveland Daniels, residents at Dixie Court

If a group of affordable housing developers have their way, patrons at high-end South Florida restaurants might eventually see names like "Dixie Court Apartments" on their menus.

A new initiative, which was the brainchild of Scott Strawbridge, director of development and facilities for the Housing Authority of the City of Fort Lauderdale, aims to place gardens in these kinds of developments so residents can grow and harvest their own fresh produce -- and, using a distribution network, see some of the fruits and vegetables of their labor end up on high-end dining tables.

The Dixie Court Apartments is the site of the pilot program in Fort Lauderdale jointly run by affordable housing developer Carlisle Group and the Housing Authority of Fort Lauderdale.

At Dixie Court, developer Carlisle Development Group has placed 18 raised planter beds for residents to begin planting and harvesting. The company has plans to roll out similar gardens at a number of its other affordable housing properties in the Fort Lauderdale area.

A percentage of the fruits and vegetables would head to a nearby food charity, the Pantry at Broward, with the surplus potentially going to restaurants and hotels, and the residents getting all the food they want.



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Page 2 of 2

While the root of the program is self-sustaining farming on a local scale, the plan is to eventually have residents grow and sell organic produce to high-end hotels and restaurants, using vacant lots to ramp up production.

"It's not in the discussion phase anymore," Strawbridge said of the idea. "I've got about a half an acre of vacant property in the core area we're developing, and we'll be setting that up as a production garden."

Strawbridge said he is still working on the model, but added that the goal would be to get enough net revenue to cover the costs, with residents literally eating the profits.

"Our business model projects that we'll be able to donate about 25 percent of everything we grow out to those who need it most [like the Pantry at Broward]. I expect to cover the production costs, create some new jobs, and create what I expect will be a superior product."

Right now, planned outlets for the produce include the hospitality and restaurant industries. Strawbridge has been able to get LXR Luxury Resorts, which owns four major resort hotels in South Florida, including three in Fort Lauderdale, to sign on.

"I said, 'would you buy the produce,' and [the regional director] said 'how big is your truck?'"

According to Strawbridge, one high-end restaurateur in downtown Fort Lauderdale asked for a separate plot of land, with the ultimate idea being a "private label" -- a plot of land in one of the developments producing just for the restaurant.

"This is the first of what we hope are many more," said Lindsay Lecour, a project manager at Carlisle. "We're looking at it as a pilot project -- how does it work, how do we get it started."